

An exchange on the politics of the April 20 anti-war protest in Washington

2 May 2002

Below we reprint a letter to the WSWS about our April 22 article, “75,000 march in Washington against US war and Israeli aggression,” and a reply by Jerry Isaacs.

Dear Editor,

First off, I want to thank you for your excellent coverage and report on the April 20 demo in DC. I had many friends who went and I wish I could have attended.

I am a loyal reader of the WSWS and look forward every day to your excellent reporting. Although I agree with everything that is reported re: the April 20 demo, there is one claim that Jerry Isaacs makes regarding the attendees of the demonstration that simply is not true.

The ever-growing anti-Israel, anti-war, anti-globalization, anti-US ruling elite and anti-capitalist movement in the United States is well aware of the cowardice, complicity and prostitution of the Democratic Party. This massive, progressive left-wing movement suffers no illusions of looking to the Democratic Party to bring progressive, positive social change to the working class. That was one of the major reasons the demonstration was organized.

If there is any political party in the US that these 75,000 people rally behind, it is the Green Party and other progressive left parties. The progressive movement in the United States is a grass roots movement. It is not sponsored by nor influenced by the Democratic Party. The left-progressive movement in the United States seeks new structures; working through the Democratic Party is not one of the means to achieve this. The April 20 demo is an expression of an all-out rejection of the big business party politics of the Democratic Party—not an endorsement of it as the leader of the American progressive left.

Sincerely,

JH

Dear JH,

Thank you for your letter and the opportunity to discuss further the political issues raised by the April 20 demonstration.

It is true that protesters expressed a widespread feeling of disgust with the Democratic Party. We were not suggesting in our article, nor is it our estimation, that there is any great enthusiasm for the Democrats among young people who are being radicalized by the war in Central Asia and the assault on democratic rights in the US.

However, we sharply disagree with your assertion that the April 20 demonstration “was an expression of an all-out rejection of the big business party politics of the Democratic Party.” This is simply not true.

None of the statements issued by the demonstration’s organizers

called for a political break with the Democratic Party. Nor did any of the speakers at the various rallies on the day of the protest. On the contrary, most of the groups involved in organizing the protest have relations with the Democratic Party and in one way or another support it. The basic political line of the demonstration was to pressure and lobby Congress for what you call progressive change. That implies a strategy of protest aimed at attempting to shift the Democratic Party to the left, not a struggle for a political break from the Democrats and the building of an independent party of the working people.

The United We March Coalition, a collection of student and pacifist groups and one of the main sponsors of the event, made no effort to hide this fact. The coalition urged demonstrators to lobby their senators and representatives to stop the war and the attack on civil liberties. It even announced a three-hour workshop on lobbying and offered to schedule visits with individual members of Congress.

The Workers World Party (WWP), which plays a leading role in the International ANSWER coalition, another sponsor of the demonstration, has longstanding relations with the Democrats, particularly with members of the Black Congressional Caucus. The concluding rally prominently featured Georgia Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney, a Democratic politician whom the WWP promotes as a “progressive black woman.”

Perhaps the crudest support for the Democratic Party came from the Communist Party USA. Supporters of the CPUSA handed out an issue of the *Peoples Weekly World* that included a two-page interview with Congresswoman Barbara Lee, a black Democrat from California, under the headline “Rep. Barbara Lee speaks for the needs of all people.” In it, Lee encouraged support for Colin Powell’s maneuvers in the Middle East and called for a vote for “progressive” Democrats in the November 2002 elections.

The CPUSA’s newspaper also carried a comment, entitled “We can defeat the ultra-right in Nov.,” which hailed the recent Florida convention of the Democratic Party as proof that the “fight is on” against Bush and the Republicans. It praised the AFL-CIO bureaucracy’s efforts to get the vote out for the Democrats and said an electoral victory would “strengthen the 55 members of the Congressional Progressive Caucus’ fight within” the government. The comment concluded: “[T]he challenge for left and progressive forces in 2002” is to expose the Bush agenda and “expand and deliver the vote this year.”

While there were no doubt differences between the sentiments of many marchers and the pro-Democratic Party orientation of the

main organizers, the basic political character of such an event is determined by the policies it puts forward.

It would be a serious political mistake to equate popular disgust with the Democrats with a conscious political break from the Democratic Party, let alone from capitalist politics as a whole. There are still lingering illusions in the Democratic Party. That was evident when demonstrators strongly applauded Martin Luther King III and other speakers on April 20 who expressed hope that the protest would encourage Democrats to “end their silence” and speak out against Bush.

In your letter you say the Green Party is a vehicle for “left-progressive” change and an independent alternative to the Democrats. This assertion, which is false, reflects a superficial conception of the struggle for genuine progressive change. The very use of the term “progressive” in an uncritical and undefined way is indicative of a left-liberal perspective, rather than a revolutionary socialist perspective that proceeds from an analysis of the actual economic and political relations of society, and bases itself on the revolutionary role of the working class.

The Green Party is based on capitalist politics and explicitly rejects the struggle for socialism. It is not a party based on the working class, but rather a middle-class party that seeks to pressure big business and its representatives to reform the profit system.

What role did the Greens play in the 2000 presidential election? In addition to encouraging the false belief that social justice, peace and a safe environment can be achieved under capitalism, the Greens reinforced illusions in the Democratic Party. On numerous occasions the Green presidential candidate, Ralph Nader, defended his campaign by characterizing it as a means of pressuring the Democratic Party to return to the liberal reformist policies it had abandoned.

The WSWS has made an extensive analysis of the US Green Party and its role in the 2000 election. I urge you to read some of our articles on the subject, including “For what social forces does Ralph Nader speak?”, “Extolling the politics of expediency: an interview with US Green Party leaders” and “Ralph Nader’s political olive branch to Bush”.

This is not the place to recapitulate in detail this analysis, but certain key points should be highlighted. First, the program of the Greens and the Nader candidacy put forward the conception that the US national state in some way represents a defense of the social interests and democratic rights of the American people, against the dictates of the transnational corporations and international agencies such as the World Trade Organization. This nationalist perspective is hostile to the struggle for the international unification of the working class against global capital and the outmoded nation-state system. Its logic is to line the Greens up with right-wing nationalist politicians like Patrick Buchanan, as well with as the AFL-CIO bureaucracy and other proponents of protectionism and chauvinism.

Second, Nader and the Greens demonstrated a contemptuous and cowardly attitude toward the defense of democratic rights. This was expressed in Nader’s support for Kenneth Starr’s witch-hunt and the impeachment of Clinton, which constituted an attempted political coup by extreme-right elements. The target of this

conspiracy was not only Clinton, but, more fundamentally, the basic rights of the American people.

Finally, there was Nader’s disgraceful silence during and after the election crisis of 2000, and his refusal to oppose the anti-democratic installation of the Bush administration on the basis of the suppression of votes.

This indifference toward the defense of democratic rights is not an incidental feature; rather, it flows inevitably from the political foundations of the Green Party. The fact that the Greens are a bourgeois political tendency has been amply demonstrated in Europe, where the Greens have joined capitalist governments, most notably in Germany, and supported austerity measures, anti-immigrant legislation and imperialist wars in the Balkans, Central Asia and elsewhere.

The Greens are only the latest in a long line of “third parties” in the US that have offered no genuine alternative to the capitalist two-party system. Repeatedly throughout American history, particularly under conditions of social crisis and widespread disillusionment with the Democrats, such parties have arisen to block the development of an independent party of the working class. One such movement was Henry Wallace’s Progressive Party in 1948, which was established—with the support of the Stalinist CPUSA—in the aftermath of the post-war strike wave, when the US ruling elite was launching the Cold War abroad and the anticommunist purge of the labor movement at home.

The one tendency within the workers movement that has consistently fought for the political independence of the working class is the Trotskyist movement. Starting in the late 1930s, our movement raised the demand for the CIO unions to break with the Democrats and form a labor party based on socialist policies. This demand was used for many years to advance the fight for the political independence of the working class and expose the treacherous role of the American trade union bureaucracy, which has opposed any serious step toward an independent party and devoted itself to keeping the working class tied to the Democrats.

Your letter, while expressing enthusiasm for the spontaneous disenchantment with the Democratic Party, reflects a failure to consider the complex historical and political questions that have up to the present prevented the working class from establishing its political independence. History has demonstrated that a break from bourgeois politics and the development of socialist consciousness are not spontaneous processes—even during times of great political and social upheaval—but require a conscious struggle by Marxists to construct a revolutionary leadership in the working class. We hope you will seriously consider these issues.

Sincerely,

Jerry Isaacs



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